UNITED
NATIONS

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Security Council

Distr.
GENERAL

S/1998/51
19 January 1998

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL CONCERNING THE SITUATION IN ABKHAZIA, GEORGIA

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted in pursuance of resolution 1124 (1997) of 31 July 1997, by which the Security Council decided to extend the mandate of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) for an additional period terminating on 31 January 1998. In the same resolution, the Council also requested me to continue to keep it regularly informed and to report after three months from the date of the adoption of the resolution on the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia, including the operations of UNOMIG. In compliance with that request, I submitted a report to the Security Council on 28 October 1997 (S/1997/827 and Add.1). The present report provides an update of the situation as at 14 January 1998, as well as recommendations regarding the peacemaking process and the role of the United Nations in the next few months.

II. POLITICAL ASPECTS

2. Vigorous efforts to move the Georgian/Abkhaz peace process forward continued to be made during the reporting period by my Special Representative for Georgia, Mr. Liviu Bota, and the Russian Federation in its capacity as facilitator, with the assistance of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Georgia. The high-level meeting between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides, which was convened at Geneva from 23 to 25 July 1997 (see S/1997/558/Add.1) under the chairmanship of my Special Representative in order to map out areas where political progress could be made, was eventually resumed on 17 November.

3. On 19 November, both sides adopted a Concluding Statement, in which they, inter alia, welcomed my proposals to strengthen the involvement of the United Nations in the peacemaking process, approved a programme of action and set up a mechanism for its implementation. The mechanism provides for the establishment of a Coordinating Council and, within its framework, that of working groups on issues related to (a) the lasting non-resumption of hostilities and security problems, (b) refugees and internally displaced persons and (c) economic and social problems. Separate groups of experts may be established to study specific aspects of issues relating to the comprehensive settlement of the

conflict. The above-mentioned bodies are to meet under the chairmanship of my Special Representative or his authorized representatives, with the participation of the representatives of the Russian Federation in its capacity as facilitator, representatives of OSCE, as well as with the group of Friends of the Secretary-General, acting as observers. The Concluding Statement also defined the status of the group of Friends of the Secretary-General in the peace process as being such that they may participate in meetings and make statements and proposals, but without being party to the negotiations.

4. The first session of the Coordinating Council took place on 18 December at Sukhumi, under the chairmanship of my Special Representative. Representatives of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Bank and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as well as the Secretary of the Georgian-Abkhaz Bilateral Joint Coordination Commission, were also present. The Abkhaz leader, Mr. Vladislav Ardzinba, addressed the opening meeting. Participants in the meeting adopted a "Statute of the Coordinating Council", in which they emphasized that the Council had been established to implement the provisions of the Concluding Statement, adopted earlier at Geneva. At the conclusion of the Council's session, meetings of the three working groups were held under the chairmanship of my Special Representative and the groups' programme of work was approved. It was decided, inter alia, to send a needs-assessment mission to Abkhazia in February 1998. Following the session, the head of the Georgian delegation, Ambassador Vazha Lordkipanidze, and, separately, representatives of the group of Friends of the Secretary-General, met Mr. Ardzinba. Both sides evaluated the results of the Council's first session positively. The next session is scheduled for February 1998 in Tbilisi.

5. There have also been bilateral contacts between the two sides. Both sides have agreed to re-establish some direct telephone communications after more than half a year's break. On 23 December 1997, a representative of the Abkhaz authorities, Mr. Enver Kapba, visited Tbilisi, where he was received by the President of Georgia, Mr. Eduard A. Shevardnadze. Issues related to the peaceful settlement of the conflict, the return of the refugees and internally displaced persons, as well as economic cooperation, were reportedly discussed. The Secretary of the Bilateral Joint Coordination Commission has travelled frequently between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.

6. During the reporting period, representatives of the Russian Federation met on several occasions with the two sides in order to promote progress in the peace process, including negotiations on the draft protocol on a Georgian-Abkhaz settlement that addressed, inter alia, the question of the future political status of Abkhazia. In early November, Ambassador Guennady Ilitchev, Special Envoy of the First Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, visited Tbilisi. On 8 and 9 December, the Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Mr. Valeri Serov, accompanied by Mr. Boris Pastukhov, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited Tbilisi and was received twice by President Shevardnadze. In the first half of December, the Minister of Defence of Georgia, General Vardiko Nadibaidze, visited Moscow. In the second half of December, the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, Mr. Vladimir Lukin, visited Sukhumi and met with the

Abkhaz leadership. At the end of December, Mr. Pastukhov visited Sukhumi, where he met with the Abkhaz leaders and the Commander of the collective peacekeeping forces of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

7. States belonging to the group of Friends of the Secretary-General also maintained contacts with the two sides. In the reporting period, besides their participation in the Geneva meeting and in the Sukhumi session of the Coordinating Council, French and United States officials accredited to Tbilisi visited separately Sukhumi and met with the Abkhaz leadership. In early November, the representative of the World Bank in Tbilisi, Mr. Joseph Owen, also visited Sukhumi to meet with the Abkhaz authorities.

8. On 16 December, the Georgian Parliament, at a special session, requested its own subsidiary bodies to assess and report, within four months, on the effectiveness of the activities of the United Nations, OSCE and CIS regarding the restoration of the territorial integrity of Georgia, as well as on the activity of Georgian representatives in the work of those international organizations.

9. During the reporting period, the Abkhaz "Parliament" passed a privatization "law". The Government of Georgia declared this "law" illegal and stated that its eventual implementation could complicate the process of a peaceful settlement.

10. There were a number of other relevant political developments. The President of Ukraine, Mr. Leonid Kuchma, during his visit to Georgia from 28 to 30 October, expressed his country's preparedness to take a direct part in the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process by sending a military contingent, under United Nations auspices, to participate in peacekeeping operations in the conflict zone (see A/52/689). On 14 November, President Shevardnadze met the South-Ossetian leader, Mr. Ludwig Chibirov, resulting in further progress on the issue of a settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. President Shevardnadze and the President of Turkmenistan, Mr. Saparmurat Nyazov, in a joint declaration on 5 December, strongly condemned all acts of aggression, separatism and terrorism that threaten the territorial integrity and security of States (see A/52/749).

11. In the Chairman's summary adopted at the sixth Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council, held at Copenhagen on 18 and 19 December, Ministers confirmed the will of OSCE to continue to support United Nations endeavours towards a lasting comprehensive settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia, including a prompt and safe return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes under international supervision and post-conflict rehabilitation. They expressed the readiness of OSCE to consider a reinforcement of the United Nations/OSCE Sukhumi Human Rights Office.

III. HUMANITARIAN SITUATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

12. UNHCR, ICRC, Acción contra la Hambre (ACH) and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF-France) continue to be the primary agencies addressing the needs of civilians in Abkhazia. In December, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) conducted an assessment of children's psychosocial programmes in Abkhazia with a

view to expanding their programmes in the region. UNHCR increased its presence in Abkhazia with the arrival of an internationally recruited Head of Office and the assignment of a United Nations Volunteer to the Sukhumi sub-office. As part of its comprehensive multisectoral programme, UNHCR continues to provide shelter materials for civilians who need support to rebuild their homes and, in collaboration with ACH, has repaired 31 schools throughout Abkhazia and has begun rehabilitation of the hospital in Tqvarcheli. In addition, UNHCR has recently begun capacity-building work with a local humanitarian non-governmental organization, Peace and Accord. ICRC recently expanded its home-care programme for extremely vulnerable people. In the Kodori Valley, ICRC and Counterpart International are addressing needs, particularly in the health and education sectors. The Halo Trust has begun demining activities.

13. The security situation in the region continues to threaten aid workers and their property. A recent mine incident involving a humanitarian agency, violent attacks against aid workers and looting of agencies' property are particularly worrisome and suggest that the security situation may be deteriorating. Aid agencies have again raised their concerns with the two sides to the conflict and have called on them to provide full support to ensure that life-saving programmes can continue to reach civilians in need.

14. The level of support from the international donor community for humanitarian programmes in Abkhazia does not yet meet the needs of the region. However, in the light of the two sides' commitment to greater social and economic cooperation in the wake of the Geneva meeting, additional support to the region, notably from the United States of America, appears to be forthcoming. It is hoped that donors will come forward with contributions at an early date so that the current level of programming can be maintained. During October, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, working in close cooperation with UNHCR and other agencies, organized a visit to the region for the Swedish International Development Agency.

15. The United Nations office for the protection and promotion of human rights in Abkhazia, Georgia, continues its work. During the reporting period, particular attention was paid to the Gali region to investigate the issue of the language of instruction in the local schools, in view of Abkhaz efforts to replace Georgian with Russian in the first three years of schooling. Special attention was also given to the improvement of conditions for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons to the Gali region, as well as to following up on alleged violations of human rights in the region.

IV. OPERATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN GEORGIA

16. During the reporting period UNOMIG continued to operate in the security and restricted weapons zones of the Zugdidi and Gali sectors and in parts of the Kodori Valley. The new modus operandi temporarily established as a result of the persistent security threat in the mission area following the hostage-taking incident of 16 September 1997 remains in place (see S/1997/827, para. 13). Despite the resulting limitations, the Chief Military Observer continues to be of the view that UNOMIG remains able to observe and verify the parties'

compliance with the Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces, signed in Moscow on 14 May 1994 (S/1994/583 and Corr.1, annex I). The Mission continues to maintain three team bases and a sector headquarters in each of the Zugdidi and Gali sectors (see map). In addition, there is one team base in the Kodori Valley manned periodically by observers operating from Sukhumi.

17. At 15 January 1998, the Mission's strength stood at 106 military observers deployed from 22 countries (see annex). However, bearing in mind the revised modus operandi, which, inter alia, provides for patrolling in groups of two vehicles at all times, and in the light of the recommendations of the United Nations security team that visited UNOMIG between 5 and 15 November 1997 (see S/1997/827, para. 15), it has been decided to bring the strength of the Mission back to 136 observers, as authorized by the Security Council under resolution 937 (1994) of 21 July 1994.

18. Arrangements are still under way to provide UNOMIG with helicopter support (see S/1997/827, para. 14). Once deployed, the helicopter will be used for both medical evacuation and operational purposes, including monitoring inaccessible areas such as the Kodori Valley during the winter months. Arrangements are also being made to provide the Mission with ballistic-protective vehicles. It is hoped that with the deployment of those vehicles and with the helicopter support, UNOMIG will be able to patrol throughout the mission area with minimal danger to the lives of the military observers.

19. As planned, the United Nations security team that, as mentioned above, visited UNOMIG in November 1997, conducted a "training of trainers" workshop on handling hostage incidents and carried out a security assessment in order to ascertain whether additional measures were required. As a result, several recommendations on enhancing the security of the military observers are now being implemented, including the training of new observers on hostage incident management guidelines.

20. The weekly quadripartite meetings chaired by the Commander of the CIS peacekeeping force, which resumed on 27 August 1997 after having been suspended for two months, were halted again on 19 November when the Abkhaz side protested the inclusion in the Georgian delegation of representatives of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia in exile. This notwithstanding, representatives of the two sides met on 24 December to discuss the exchange of prisoners and repatriation of the remains of men killed as a result of the hostilities. Following that meeting, an agreement was reached under which the Government of Georgia will receive one prisoner and the remains of one individual in exchange for two Abkhaz civilians.

21. UNOMIG continues to cooperate with United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations working on both sides of the Inguri River. It regularly shares information with them, provides them with escorts when requested and assists them in the delivery of humanitarian aid to the population in the conflict zone.

V. COOPERATION BETWEEN THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN GEORGIA AND THE COLLECTIVE PEACEKEEPING FORCES OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES

22. The Mission continues to observe the operations of the CIS peacekeeping force within the framework of the implementation of the 1994 Agreement. Cooperation on the ground between UNOMIG and the CIS peacekeeping force continues in the form of regular meetings, exchange of information and mutual assistance. Exercises take place periodically to rehearse the security arrangements established between UNOMIG and the CIS peacekeeping force. In addition, coordinating meetings on security issues are held regularly between the CIS peacekeeping force and the Mission at the sector level. Following the rotation of the CIS troops operating in the mission area, several of the newly deployed units began to carry out limited patrolling on a 24-hour basis. The Chief Military Observer believes that such patrolling will improve the security situation in the area.

VI. SITUATION ON THE GROUND

A. General

23. The situation in the Gali and Zugdidi restricted weapons and security zones remains unsettled and tense. Armed activities against the Abkhaz forces and establishments belonging to the Abkhaz authorities increased significantly during the reporting period, particularly in the weeks before the Geneva meeting. The CIS peacekeeping force also suffered several casualties as a result of those activities. For the first time since the beginning of activities by armed elements, important installations and public utility facilities, such as the railway link, the power supply system, road bridges and public restaurants, were targeted. The overall security situation in the mission area was also affected by the rising number of criminal activities, including kidnapping and murder.

B. Security and restricted weapons zones

24. The situation in the security and restricted weapons zones of the Gali sector deteriorated particularly in October and November when several significant incidents took place. On 11 November, an explosion occurred at the electric power transformer station in Gali town, damaging two out of three transformers and disrupting the power supply to a large area encompassing Gali town and its surrounding area and the town of Zugdidi. On 14 November, an Abkhaz army supply truck was involved in a mine incident north of the Gali canal which injured seven soldiers. On 1 December, the Abkhaz militia headquarters building in Gali town was attacked with anti-tank grenades and automatic fire. A further incident took place on 7 January 1998, when the Abkhaz militia stopped a bus carrying some 30 passengers at a point that the Abkhaz authorities consider an illegal crossing of the Inguri River and detained eight individuals. On the same day, the Abkhaz militia crossed over to the south of the Inguri River and arrested a person suspected of taking part in armed activities. All those detained were subsequently released. UNOMIG has protested the Abkhaz

crossing of the Inguri River. On 9 January, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia made a statement on the incident (S/1998/25, annex).

25. Several attacks on selected targets using direct fire weapons and command-detonated mines were reported. The attacks, which continued to target mainly the Abkhaz militia and the CIS peacekeeping force, injured 12 people. The situation in the Zugdidi area also remained unstable during the reporting period. For the first time since the beginning of the mine campaign in March 1996, several explosions took place in the Zugdidi area, killing one person.

26. The Abkhaz authorities in exile have deployed some 250 police officers who do not report to the Zugdidi police but have their own chain of command. Their stated aim is to prevent armed groups from crossing into the area north of the Inguri River. For some time during the months of October and November, the officers, who carry identification cards from the Ministry of Interior of Georgia, patrolled along the south bank of the Inguri River. They have now restricted themselves to a checkpoint on the Georgian side near the main bridge.

27. Both sides continue to violate the 14 May 1994 Agreement. During the reporting period, UNOMIG reported 41 such violations by the Government of Georgia and 19 by the Abkhaz side. The majority of those violations were minor ones involving individual servicemen found without arms in the security zone. UNOMIG also reported that those violations did not affect the situation on the ground. The long-standing violations of the Moscow Agreement (see S/1997/827, para. 25) also continued in spite of UNOMIG's repeated protests to the Government of Georgia and the Abkhaz authorities.

C. Kodori Valley

28. The condition of the road leading to the Kodori Valley worsened considerably as a result of landslides. During the reporting period UNOMIG continued to patrol the Valley but, since the beginning of October, has only been able to patrol the area up to the CIS peacekeeping forces' checkpoint near the village of Lata.

29. Reportedly, the situation in the Valley became unstable after the killing of an Abkhaz soldier near Lata on the night of 16 November. On the same night, the Georgian police building near Adjara was also reported to have been the target of an attack which killed one Georgian police officer.

VII. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS

30. The Government of Georgia continues to ensure proper coordination of donor activities, both for humanitarian and developmental purposes, with assistance from United Nations and non-United Nations organizations. On 11 December, a Consultative Group meeting took place in Paris under the auspices of the World Bank. At the meeting, the Government presented a detailed picture of the present economic situation of the country and of its development prospects in future years.

31. The country no longer faces the critical economic problems that beset it in the years immediately following its independence. This is evidenced in the rates of economic growth recorded over the past two years. Inflation is now under control, the value of the national currency (the lari) in relation to the United States dollar is stable and public deficit is contained within the limits negotiated with the Bretton Woods institutions. In addition, the Government has successfully completed negotiations for the rescheduling of its foreign debt.

32. It is important to underline, however, that the sacrifices endured by the Georgian population have been severe. The tight fiscal discipline imposed by the Government's economic policy has resulted in significant cuts in public expenditures, particularly in the health and education sectors. Care should be taken that the detrimental effects of economic transformation on the social sector not endanger the country's economic stability and economic growth in the longer term. While this is ultimately a challenge for the Government of Georgia, the continued support of the international community, particularly in the energy and social sectors, is equally critical to the success of this effort.

33. To alleviate the severe energy crisis and restore an adequate energy supply, the Government has indicated its intention to start a programme of privatization and to improve the rate of collection of payment for the use of energy resources that, at present, is particularly low, especially for residential consumers.

34. Finally, Parliament has approved a new law to fight corruption. The Government has elaborated a national programme to combat this scourge which is to be implemented with the support of UNDP and the World Bank. Enforcement of the new legislation and support to the government programme should be facilitated by the ongoing reform of the judicial sector.

VIII. FINANCIAL ASPECTS

35. By its resolution 51/236 of 13 June 1997, the General Assembly appropriated an amount of $18,580,500 (gross), equivalent to $1,548,375 per month for UNOMIG for the period from 1 July 1997 to 30 June 1998. The assessment of those amounts is subject to the decision of the Security Council to extend the mandate of the Mission. In addition, on 11 December, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions authorized the Secretary-General to enter into commitments in the amount of $1,653,600 to improve the safety of UNOMIG personnel and create conditions for the effective performance of its mandate.

36. Should the Security Council decide to extend the mandate of UNOMIG beyond 31 January 1998, as recommended in paragraph 41 below, the cost of maintaining the Mission until 30 June 1998 would be limited to the appropriation contained in General Assembly resolution 51/236 and the additional authorization provided by the Advisory Committee. I shall report to the Assembly on the additional requirements needed, if any, for the maintenance of the Mission beyond 30 June 1998.

37. As at 31 December 1997, unpaid assessed contributions to the UNOMIG Special Account amounted to $6.4 million. The total of outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations at that date amounted to $1.6 billion.

X. OBSERVATIONS

38. Much groundwork has been laid during the reporting period towards achieving substantive progress in the Georgian/Abkhaz peace process: United Nations efforts in that regard have been further revitalized, in close coordination with the Russian Federation in its capacity as facilitator and OSCE; the role of the group of Friends of the Secretary-General has been clarified and agreed upon; and the Concluding Statement adopted at Geneva on 19 November now provides an implementation plan.

39. Political machinery to address the military, political and economic ramifications of the peace process is now in place: the Coordinating Council and three working groups have been established and have already met for the first time at Sukhumi in December 1997. Further meetings are planned in January 1998 for the working groups, in February for the Coordinating Council, which will convene at Tbilisi, and in March/April for the high-level Geneva mechanism. Progress, therefore, now depends more than ever on the determination of the two sides to negotiate in earnest and to work constructively with my Special Representative to achieve substantive results. I also appeal to them to continue to expand their bilateral contacts. Progress in the area of the return of refugees and internally displaced persons is urgently needed in order to give additional credibility to the peace process.

40. Thanks in part to the additional steps taken to ensure the security of the Mission, it can be noted with satisfaction that UNOMIG was able, during the reporting period, to carry out the tasks entrusted to it in relative safety. I am confident that the deployment of the ballistic-protected vehicles and the helicopter support, together with the implementation of the recommendations of the security team, will enhance further the security of the Mission's unarmed military observers. However, precautionary measures notwithstanding, it should be remembered that, in UNOMIG as in many peacekeeping operations where local conditions are dangerous, risks to the observers' lives cannot be completely ruled out.

41. Bearing in mind that UNOMIG's presence continues to be a stabilizing factor in the area and to provide useful support for the political process, and in the light of the steps already taken to promote substantive progress in the Georgian/Abkhaz peace process, I recommend that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNOMIG for an additional period of six months, ending on 31 July 1998, subject to a review by the Council in the event of any changes that may be made in the mandate of the CIS peacekeeping force.

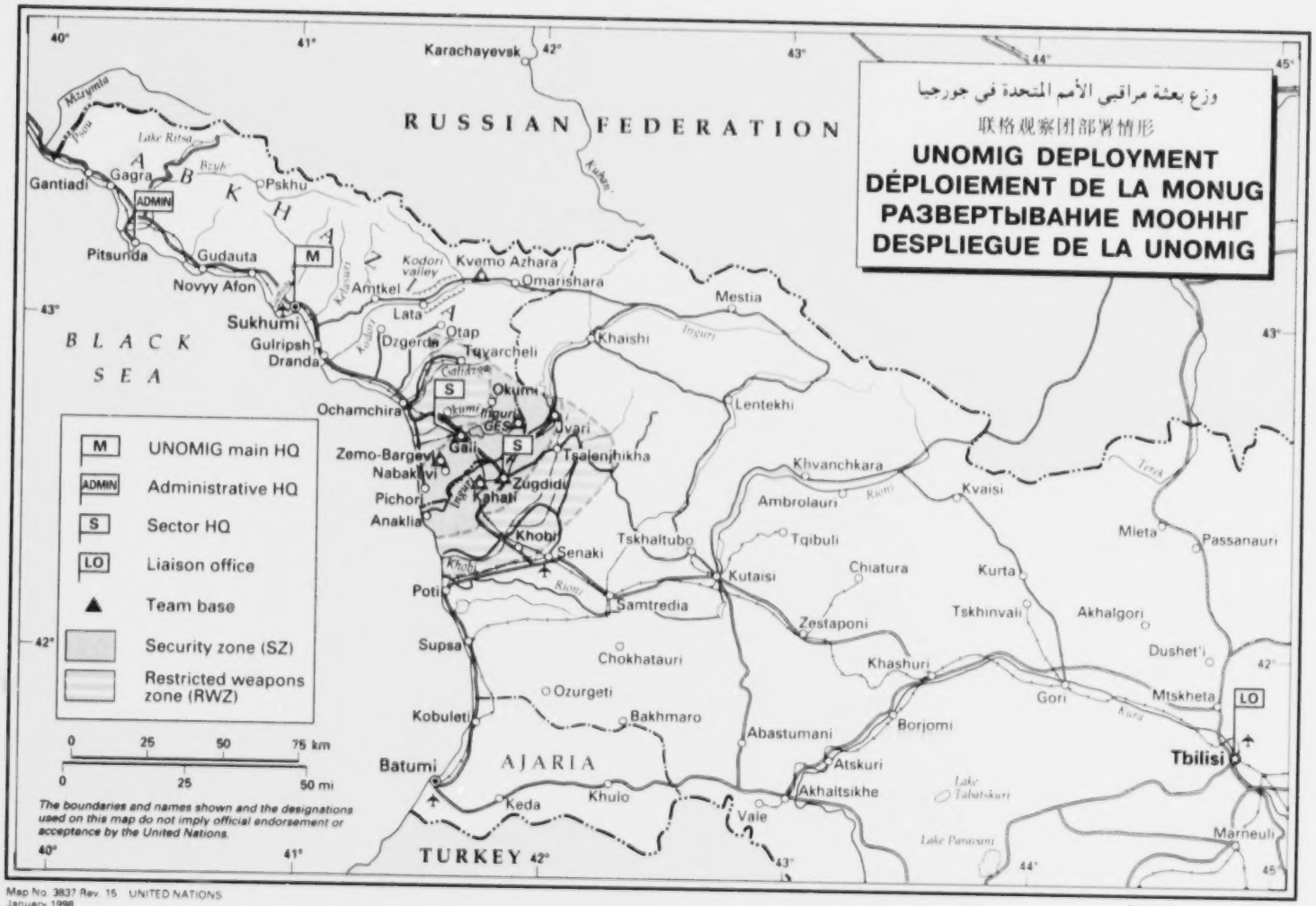
42. In conclusion, I wish to take this opportunity to thank my Special Representative, Mr. Liviu Bota, the Chief Military Observer, Major-General Harun Ar-Rashid, and all the military and civilian personnel under their command, for their dedication and perseverance in carrying out,

under difficult and at times dangerous conditions, the tasks entrusted to them by the Security Council.

Annex

Composition of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia as at 15 January 1998

Country	Military observers
Albania	1
Austria	4
Bangladesh	9
Czech Republic	4
Denmark	5
Egypt	4
France	5
Germany	10
Greece	4
Hungary	5
Indonesia	4
Jordan	6
Pakistan	5
Poland	4
Republic of Korea	4
Russian Federation	3
Sweden	5
Switzerland	5
Turkey	4
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	7
United States of America	4
Uruguay	4
Total	106



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January 1998

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